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Saint Augustine on Holy Virginity 103
SISTER MARY CELESTE, S.M.

The Community 116
A. DURAND

Imperfections 124
EDWARD HAGEMANN, S.J.

Poem 132
FRED PENNING

Book Reviews 133

NIHIL OBSTAT: Reinold Theisen, O.S.B., *Censor deput.* IMPRIMATUR: ✠ Peter W. Bartholome, D.D., *Episc. Sancti Clodoaldi.*

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Saint Augustine on Holy Virginity

SISTER MARY CELESTE, S.M.

In the Pentecostal springtime of contemporary Christianity, our minds are more and more attuned to the wonder of new discoveries of life in the Church. Along with emphasis on the sanctity of marriage in Christ and with the flowering of new states of Christian holiness such as the secular institutes, there has also been, especially in the years since Pius XII wrote his encyclical *Sacra virginitas*, a renewed stress on the mission of the religious Sister in the Church and on the meaning and excellence of her consecration. At the same time, just as in the spring, there is a deepening of roots, a return to the sources. We are re-discovering the profound riches of those wellsprings of Christian thought: Sacred Scripture, liturgy, and the Fathers of the Church.

Perhaps there is no Father of the Church whose teaching on Christian virginity seems so "ever ancient, ever new" as the great African bishop of Hippo. With the unerring clarity and precision of the wise man guided by divine light, Saint Augustine drank deeply of the purest fountains of truth. In Scripture, he found the counsels of Christ recorded by the Synoptics and interpreted by Saint Paul and Saint John, which throw into strong relief the eminence of virginity without in any way depreciating the value and beauty of marriage. Before his time, this tradition in the early Church had already been molded by writers such as Saint Justin, Tertullian, Origen, Saint Methodius, Saint Cyprian, and the author of the Clementine epistle. Saint Augustine's personal experience of Manicheism, too, guided him to emphasize the positive aspects of virginity in its relation to the Christian life: for by their heretical dualism the Manichees had condemned marriage as evil and encouraged the practice of "continence" only as a means of avoiding the procreation of children. At the end of the fourth century, the renegade monk Jovinian had raised a controversy concerning, among other things, the relative merits of virginity and marriage, and had denied the perpetual virginity of Mary. When Jovinian moved to Milan with his confreres after a papal condemnation,

the bishop, Saint Ambrose, vigorously opposed his teachings. Saint Jerome also penned a bitter letter against him; but in his rash enthusiasm for praising the state of consecrated virgins, Jerome all but condemned marriage.

Against this background is highlighted the practical and exalted beauty of Saint Augustine's treatise on holy virginity.[1] This work, the fruit of his maturing wisdom, was written in the year 401 when he had been a bishop for five years. Twenty-five years later, in commenting on his earlier writings, he had no adverse criticism to make of it;[2] he tells us then that he wrote it immediately after his treatise on the beauty of married life, and it is evident that he intended it to be a complementary study. Based on Sacred Scripture and tradition, and reacting against the heresies of Manicheism and Jovinianism, Saint Augustine's teaching on virginity stresses above all the positive values of this state of life. He has a dual purpose in writing it: first, to praise this great gift of God so that it may be loved; and second, to warn virgins that humility is the most essential guardian of their virtues.[3] Saint Augustine's doctrine is also found in many of his other writings, especially in sermons, notes on the psalms, and in the famous letter which is the basis of his Rule. Everywhere he shows the same personal concern to preserve the purity of Christian teaching on the meaning and place of virginity in the Church.

EXEMPLARS OR TYPES OF VIRGINITY

For Saint Augustine, there are three levels of reality: God, the soul, and material things. It is by turning upward toward God that the soul is illumined by him and is made capable of living a good spiritual life. Because of the Neoplatonic orientation of this theory, "models" or "exemplars" of virtue have for Saint Augustine a somewhat fuller meaning than that ordinarily connoted — almost, it would seem, a causal relation to the other members of the Church. Who are the exemplars of virginity? There is first of all Christ,

[1] Text of *De sancta virginitate: PL* 40.395-427; Benedictine edition, in *Oeuvres de S. Augustin*, t. III, Ire serie: Opuscules (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1949), 2e Edition. English translation by John McQuade, S.M., in *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, Vol. 27 (N.Y.: Fathers of the Church, Inc. [series now taken over by Catholic University Press], 1955), pp. 135-212.

[2] *Retractationes* 2.23 (*PL* 32.640).

[3] *De sancta virginitate* 1.1 (Hereafter abbreviated *SV*)

whom the chaste in heart and body follow wherever he goes; for what does following him mean, unless it be imitating him?[4] There is Mary, his mother, who freely consecrated her virginity to God and thus led a heavenly life in her mortal body.[5] In this way her spiritual affinity to Christ endeared her more to him than her maternal relationship; she did the will of his Father and was united to him through obedience to his teaching and through imitation of his life.[6] This was his gift to her: that while she was privileged to bear a Son, at the same time her virginity was preserved. Thus the glory of virginity took its beginning in the Mother of the Lord.[7] Therefore, exhorts the holy Doctor, all chaste virgins should rejoice, and to the best of their ability should imitate Mary, the immaculate virgin, in whose footsteps they follow.[8]

But the virgin Mother and her divine Son are not merely models of human perfection to be copied from afar; they are intimately united with all those incorporated into the Body of Christ. This Body, the Church, is itself a virgin because of the integrity of her faith, which is preserved in her as a kind of chastity.[9] It is to the Church that the Apostle says, "I have prepared you for one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ"; why does he say "chaste virgin," Augustine asks, if not because of the purity of her faith, her hope, and her charity?[10] What great honor, then, is deserved by those members of hers who preserve in their very flesh that which the whole Church, imitating the Mother of Christ, preserves in their faith![11] But the Church is also a mother because she gives birth to those who are baptized in Christ; in this, she most resembles Mary.[12] As Mary bore the Head of this Body in the flesh, so the Church bears his members in the spirit; and in neither is virginity a hindrance to motherhood, nor does fruitfulness destroy virginity.[13] After Mary, then, the Church is preeminently the model of consecrated souls. "Virgins

4 *SV* 27
5 *SV* 4
6 *SV* 2; cf Mt 12:48-50
7 Sermon 51 (*PL* 38.348)
8 Sermon 191 (*PL* 38.1010)
9 *SV* 2; 48
10 Sermon 93 (*PL* 37.575); sermon 188 (*PL* 38.1004)
11 *SV* 2
12 Sermon 213 (*PL* 37.1063)
13 *SV* 2

shall be brought to the King after her"; to what a degree, exclaims Saint Augustine, do they now seek to find favor in the eyes of that King! And why are they impelled to do so, but because the virgin Church, their mother, has preceded them? [14]

THE MEANING AND ESSENCE OF VIRGINITY

Christian virginity, modeled on that of Mary and of the Church, is essentially a DEDICATION TO GOD: only for this reason does Saint Augustine consider it praiseworthy.[15] For although in the flesh, it is nevertheless preserved there by religion and devotion which is of the spirit; thus bodily virginity itself, vowed to God, is a spiritual consecration.[16] If even conjugal chastity is not attributed to the flesh but to the soul which directs and commands the virtuous use of the body, how much the more is that continence to be numbered among the goods of the soul by which integrity of body is vowed, consecrated, and preserved for the very Creator of soul and of body?[17] This predominant subordination of flesh to spirit, completely in harmony with Saint Augustine's general view of reality, has the added advantage of drawing a definitive line between the Christian ideal of dedication and the heretical pagan view of a purely negative regard for physical virginity. It is further emphasized by Augustine's insistence that every Christian, imitating the Church by the purity of faith, must at least have virginity of mind and heart.[18]

Though all members of the Church must preserve a pure faith, there are relatively few who are called to the vocation of complete dedication to the Lord by religious chastity. "Called," because it is a GIFT OF GOD.[19] This is the second essential characteristic of Christian virginity. Is it not clearly stated in Scripture, notes Saint Augustine: "I knew that I could not otherwise be chaste, except God gave it; and this also was a point of wisdom, to know whose gift it was" (Wis. 8:21)? A man must acquire for himself this wisdom, by which he acknowledges that gift to be not his own, but God's.[20] And how does he do this? The humble

[14] *In Ps.* 44.30 (*PL* 36.512)
[15] *SV* 11
[16] *SV* 8
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] *In Ps. 90* (*PL* 37.1168); *In Ps. 147* (*PL* 37.1920); Sermon 93 (*PL* 37.575); Sermon 191 (*PL* 38.1010); Sermon 341 (*PL* 39. 1496).
[19] *SV* 51
[20] *SV* 42

Augustine answers in his *Confessions:* "Would any man, considering his own weakness, dare to attribute his chastity or his innocence to his own powers, and so love thee less, O Lord — as if he did not need the same mercy as those who return to thee after having sinned?"[21] For whoever remains chaste from the beginning is governed by God.[22] Virgins must consider, then, that it is by the King their God that they have been adorned with gifts, redeemed, and preserved in innocence; whatever they have that is pleasing to him, they have from him.[23] No one, therefore, protects his virginal blessings by his own powers; God himself protects it since he has bestowed it, and God is love.[24] By what perversity, then, exhorts the saint, do you love him less from whom you have received so much more?[25] Do not love just a little, as though little were pardoned you by him; rather love him very much, by whom much has been given to you.[26] By this love you will show how highly you prize his gift.

And it can be basically a matter of love, for though it is first a gift of God, it is not a command of his. He does not threaten; he only invites.[27] Come into the courts of the Lord, urges Saint Augustine, not through necessity, since you are masters of your own will.[28] Even in Mary, in whom Christ took on himself the nature of a slave, He desired virginity to be free.[29] She consecrated herself to God while still in ignorance of her destiny as his Mother, so that the leading of a heavenly life in her earthly and mortal body might be brought about by vow, not by precept, and by a love of her own choice, not by the compulsion of obedience.[30] Saint Augustine prays for the nuns to whom he gives his Rule:

> May the Lord grant you to observe all these regulations with love, as souls whose affections are set on spiritual beauty, whose good conduct is fragrant with the good odor of Christ, not as bondswomen under the law, but as free women established under grace.[31]

[21] *Confessiones* 2.7.15 (*PL* 32.681)
[22] *SV* 42
[23] *In Ps.* 44.26 (*PL* 36.510)
[24] *SV* 51
[25] *SV* 40
[26] *SV* 42
[27] *SV* 36
[28] *SV* 30
[29] *SV* 4
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] Letter 211. Translated by Sister Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D., in *St. Augustine: Letters #204-270.* Vol. 5, (N.Y.: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1956).

The third essential element of Christian virginity is then perfectly clear. The dedication to God of his spiritual gift in one's whole person, body and soul, is a FREE CHOICE OF LOVE.

Saint Augustine had reflected on its ideal pattern in the dedication of the Blessed Virgin Mary to God, and of the Church to Christ. He fully recognized, too, the intrinsic beauty and goodness of devoted married love. Permeated with the exquisite Semitic symbolism of the Scriptures, he expresses the classic parallel between the states of Christian marriage and consecrated virginity in an image which has more than symbolic reality: the virgin is the spouse of Christ. The Church first is her model.[32] In Mary, she is called to rejoice; for a virgin has brought forth for her the One to whom she may espouse herself without fear of defiling his gift.[33] This Spouse is her Redeemer. To him she should cling and be joyful, for he did not deprive Mary of her virginity even when he was born of her body; all the more does he preserve it for the virgin in his spiritual embrace.[34]

Of whom does the psalmist sing in the words, "The King has greatly desired thy beauty"? This King, Saint Augustine reminds the virgin, is the Lord your God; now consider whether you should not leave your father and your own people, and come to this King your God, who is also your Bridegroom.[35] As a wife is concerned about pleasing her husband, writes Saint Paul, the virgin is concerned about the things of the Lord, how she may please him, so that she may be holy in body and in spirit (I Cor 7:32-34). By a greater love and an interior beauty of heart, the virgin should seek to please God more than the married woman tries to please her husband.[36] Then long for his presence, love him, cries Saint Augustine; burn with love for him, since you are his betrothed.[37] If you would have owed great love to your husband, how much ought you to love him for whose sake you have chosen not to have a husband! Let him be placed in complete possession of your heart.[38] If you have foregone the nuptials of the sons of men, then love

[32] *Tract. in Joan.* 9.2.3 (*PL* 34.1459)
[33] Sermon 184 (*PL* 38.996)
[34] Sermon 191 (*PL* 38.1011)
[35] *In Ps. 44* (*PL* 37.1170)
[36] Sermon 161 (*PL* 37.884)
[37] *In Ps. 90* (*PL* 37.1170)
[38] *SV* 55

him with all your heart who is beautiful above the sons of men; you have the opportunity, for your heart is free from the bonds of marriage. By the interior illumination from God, contemplate the beauty of your Lover — the wounds of him crucified, the blood of him dying, the scars of him risen; he is the ransom of you who believe in him, the price of you who are redeemed by him.[39]

It is no mere aesthetic appreciation to which Saint Augustine appeals here. Christ suffering in his humanity and in his members evokes from one dedicated to him an intensity of spiritual love which includes not only her whole soul and mind, but the real and fervent compassion of her heart and strength as a woman.

VIRTUES OF THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN

The virgin consecrated to God by the vow of chastity must lead a spiritual life distinguished chiefly by two virtues: charity and humility. These are complementary aspects of the love of God which is the essence of her state in life. This love is the highest fulfillment and expression of the *ratio superior* (the "higher reason" of the soul) whose function is to contemplate immutable truth in God, and to regard all created things in the light of this truth.[40] The virgin who asks of the Lord to dwell in his house and delight in his company must above all have an attitude of great reverence toward him. In loving the goodness of God, she must fear lest she offend him; this chaste fear is never separated from love.[41] It is fitting to virgins to be wise, observes Saint Augustine; and a holy fear, the companion of charity, is the prelude to wisdom — for Wisdom itself has said to man, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.[42] The fear of which Augustine speaks here is *pietas* — the reverential love of a child for its father.

If the proof of this love is an outgoing charity for one's neighbor, children of the same heavenly Father, then, exclaims Saint Augustine to the virgins he is addressing, even now you fulfill that measure of love, that you lay down your life for your brethren.[43] He writes to the nuns of his diocese:

[39] *SV* 54
[40] *De Trinitate* 12.3.3 (*PL* 42.99)
[41] *SV* 38
[42] *SV* 38; cf Job 28:28
[43] *SV* 53

> Even in the midst of the great scandals which abound everywhere in the world, I frequently comfort myself with the thought of your numerous community, your chaste love, your holy conversation, and the grace of God which has been given more generously to you that you might not only forego carnal marriage but might also choose the fellowship of dwelling together in a house in unity, that you may have one soul and one heart in God.[44]

Unity in charity is partly the cause and partly the result of the overflow of divine love to the governing and control of the virgin's whole exterior conduct. Her actions must reflect the interior holiness of her soul. Behold, the saint adds, you are already such that you conform in the rest of your conduct to the virginity you have professed and preserved. You not only already abstain from murder, sacrifices to devils, and other great evils, but even those things which neither are or are considered less grave are not found to arise in your midst: neither immodest mein, nor wandering eyes, nor unbridled tongue, nor coquettish smile, nor indecent jest, nor unbecoming dress, nor haughty and dignified carriage.[45] For it is from an unchaste mind and heart that unchaste actions arise, and by which the virtue of chastity is violated in the soul, though the body remains untouched.[46] Therefore, if you would be like the wise virgins in the parable, you must take care to subdue the desires of the flesh. Not without reason are the wise virgins symbolized by the number five: for by the five senses of the body enter all unlawful desires which can corrupt the soul.[47] Christ craves your interior loveliness, his gift to you; he seeks in you a beauty of conduct by which you even hold the flesh in control.[48] "All the glory of the King's daughter is within," writes the psalmist; and Saint Augustine asks, What are those inward charms? Those of conscience, of her soul. It is there Christ sees her, it is there he loves her; it is there he speaks to her and crowns her.[49] It is by preserving the integrity of these interior gifts that the virgin returns his love.

[44] Letter #211
[45] *SV* 53
[46] Letter #211
[47] *In Ps. 147* (*PL* 37.1920)
[48] *SV* 55
[49] *In Ps. 44* (*PL* 36.512)

While charity is the basis of her reverential fear of God, the bond of unity with her religious sisters, and the source of the beauty reflected in her exterior conduct, there is another virtue which claims from the pen of Saint Augustine an almost equal attention. This is humility. He reminds us of his twofold purpose in writing the treatise on virginity: not only does he want to show how great is this gift of God, but he wants to impress on those who have received it the necessity of humility. Fully half of his work is devoted to an exhortation on this virtue. The connection to him is obvious. Give me someone professing perpetual continence, he says, someone who is free from these vices of conduct; and for her, I fear pride.[50] The whole Christian way of life wages war against pride by teaching humility, for this is the means by which it acquires and preserves chastity.[51] These two virtues, then, are aspects of the same love of God in which spiritual chastity is rooted. Because virginity is a great blessing, it must be guarded against corruption with great vigilance.[52] In proportion as the gift is more excellent and divine, so much the more does its sublimity prompt Saint Augustine to speak with great concern, not only about this surpassing glory of chastity, but also about its most excellent safeguard, humility.[53] For a virgin, recognizing in herself the grace of God, is easily tempted by the snare of pride to exalt herself, and thus to wound the love of him whose gift it is — not only this love, but also the love of her neighbor, by despising others.[54]

Christ himself must then be the virgin's model in humility. It was because of the "weight" of his charity — the *pondus*, the urgency, the gravitational force of it — that he descended to us from heaven.[55] Come humbly to the humble One, writes the saint; if you love, do not hesitate to follow him on the road to the heights by the footsteps of lowliness.[56] Learn from him who is meek and humble of heart; and in proportion as his gift in you is great, so humble yourself in all things that you may find favor with him.[57] If you seek his mercy and truth, come to him and

[50] *SV* 34
[51] *SV* 31
[52] *SV* 33
[53] *SV* 31
[54] *SV* 43
[55] *SV* 37
[56] *SV* 52
[57] *SV* 37

learn from him by living for him and not for yourself.[58] The effect of this humility will then be an unselfish love, which is in turn the incentive for a deeper humility. The Christian virgin must always keep Christ as the supreme ideal and exemplar of her virtue; in contemplating him, her soul is illumined with truth. So, Saint Augustine wonders, are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ reduced to this, that we learn from him as something great that he is meek and humble of heart? Is it so great a thing to be humble that, unless it were learned from him who is so great, it could not be learned at all?[59]

As a practical teacher of Christian spirituality, Saint Augustine could not let these considerations rest in a purely speculative realm. What will help the virgin, so endowed with gifts from God, to preserve humility, in order that she may not violate that charity which surpasses all gifts? It is by reflecting that the limits of her virtue remain obscure and uncertain. She may not be able to do anything more noble than that which she knows already that she can do.[60] She must think about the hidden gifts of God in souls, which only the proof of trial reveals to each one, even within herself. Although the virgin may be concerned for pleasing the Lord, how does she know she would be ready for martyrdom? On the other hand, a humble married woman, pure of heart, to whom she seeks to prefer herself in pride, may be already able to drink the cup of the Lord's humiliation.[61]

Thus is the loving dedication of the virgin to God reflected in her spiritual life by charity and humility, virtues which are at once the twin fruit of her dedication and the means of preserving its purity.

THE PLACE OF VIRGINS IN THE CITY OF GOD

In the Augustinian concept of the world of redeemed humanity, no one person ever stands alone. All are purchased with the same Price, destined for the same vision, united as members of the same unique Body. So the state of virginity, in the teaching of Saint Augustine, has its integral place within the divine governance of the City of God. The trustworthy and sound doctrine of Sacred

[58] *SV* 36
[59] *SV* 35
[60] *SV* 47
[61] *SV* 44

Scripture shows us that there are three states of life in the Church for the members of Christ: married continence, widowed chastity, and consecrated virginity.[62] According to the teaching of the Lord, Augustine notes, marriage must never be looked down upon as sinful; yet its blessing is to be placed beneath that of widowhood and of virginity.[63] The virgin should not hesitate to place her state as highest above the others, yet should humbly prefer this greater gift in such a way that she does not contemn the lesser ones.[64] Above all, the saint writes, let her consider that the glory of her gift is itself greater from this fact: that to obtain it, the blessing of marriage is foregone, not that the sin of marriage is avoided.[65]

In his development of the nuptial theme of espousal with Christ, Saint Augustine draws another parallel between the virgin and the married woman. Mary and the Church are indeed the proto-exemplars of viriginity; but the highest dignity and function of the Blessed Virgin was her office as Mother of the Redeemer, and the purpose of the Church is the engendering of the members of Christ by Baptism. Imitating them, every holy soul, both married and virgin, who carries out the will of the Father, is likewise in a spiritual manner the Mother of Christ by a most fruitful charity.[66] It is by charity that the soul adheres most closely to God, by which it is rendered incorruptible (and thus chaste) to a greater degree, and in which he gives to it a spiritual motherhood.[67] For it is precisely a holy purity of the flesh that leads to fruitfulness of the spirit. The virgin must consider how she may please the Lord in all things, so that her soul may abound with virtues of his bestowing.[68] In this manner, because she is more closely united with Christ, she must manifest him in her person by the purity and sanctity of her life. She must bear him anew by being, as it were, another humanity through which he may be present in the world. He has a right to expect this fruition of virtue from her dedication.

[62] Sermon 196 (*PL* 37.1020)
[63] *SV* 19; 21
[64] *SV* 44; 18
[65] *SV* 21
[66] *SV* 5; 6
[67] *Expositio epist. ad Galatos* 1.51 (*PL* 35.2141)
[68] Sermon 191 (*PL* 38.1011)

And more than this. The third Person of the triune God who is Love itself dwells within his Church. What members of this holy Body ought to have greater care that the Holy Spirit rest upon them, Saint Augustine asks, than those who profess a virginal holiness? Where else is the dwelling place of his repose but a humble heart, emptied of itself, which he fills and lifts up?[69] By reason of her place in the Church, there is a greater incentive for the chaste soul to practice a universal and selfless love, radiating the holiness bestowed by the Spirit of love.

Finally, the virgin's life is an eschatological sign that the Kingdom has already begun to be established in the hearts of men. She displays a heavenly manner of living before the world.[70] She has embraced a vow of perpetual continence not for the sake of the present temporal life, but for the future which is promised in the Kingdom of heaven.[71] Thus, her freedom from what is carnal through holy chastity is a foretaste in corruptible flesh of perpetual incorruption, an angelic lot.[72] She has put aside the good of lawful marriage and cut at the very root of concupiscence.[73] Certainly, then, her reward will be greater than that of others if she remains faithful to her vow, for in the flesh she already possesses something not of the flesh.[74] Saint Augustine recalls the words of John the virgin apostle, that those of undefiled body and inviolate truthfulness of heart will follow the Lamb wherever he goes, and sing a canticle before his throne that is not given to others to sing.[75] They will have an "everlasting name" — a special and eminent glory not possessed by the rest, even though they will dwell in the same kingdom and the same house.[76] Then press on, O virgins, encourages the saint; press on unflaggingly toward your goal. Praise the Lord more sweetly, to whom your thoughts are so fully devoted; hope in him more joyfully, whom you serve so eagerly; love him more and more ardently, whom you are so careful to please.[77]

* * * *

The profoundly Christian teaching of Saint Augustine on holy virginity has been given new authority in our day by the en-

[69] *SV* 39
[70] *SV* 53
[71] *SV* 22; 29
[72] *SV* 13
[73] *SV* 24
[74] *SV* 13
[75] *SV* 27
[76] *SV* 25
[77] *SV* 27

cyclical in which the late Pope Pius XII reiterated many of the ideas Augustine had presented in *De Sancta virginitate* fifteen centuries earlier.[78] For Saint Augustine, dedication to God by the vow of chastity finds its ideal, its type, its exemplary cause, in the Blessed Virgin Mary and in the Church. Because it is freely chosen by the soul who responds to the divine gift of love, virginity forms a real bond of espousal with Christ. Thus in the virgin's spiritual life, there is a double and reciprocally active effect: love of God is the source of her reverential fear of him, the beginning of wisdom, the rule of her exterior conduct, the motive of her humility. It is also by the return of this love that the purity of her virtue is fortified and rendered more incorruptible by a greater nearness to the source of absolute and immutable incorruption.

But for Saint Augustine, the Mystical Body is a vivid reality; the Christian is never divorced from the whole Christ. The virgin's role in the spiritual life of the City of God is no less important. Because she does not disdain the flesh as evil nor look down upon marriage as something sinful, yet foregoes even these things which in themselves are good, her heart is freed to spend its human love on all without exclusion. She continues the office of Mary her model, bearing Christ in a spiritual manner by a virtuous life, and radiating his charity, his humility, and his incorruptible purity to the world. The Holy Spirit dwells in the members of Christ in proportion as they humbly acknowledge his gifts; and so with the Church her exemplar, the virgin shares in the work of sanctification of the human race, for the Spirit will overshadow her heart if it is humble, and will manifest his power anew in her spiritual motherhood of souls. Her very rewards in heaven are not without a social import, for it is to the glory of the whole City of God that some of their number are able to praise the Lamb closer to his throne. The virgin is, then, a kind of sacramental symbol of man's destiny, for the goal of his striving has already begun its realization in her. She is to mankind a partial epiphany of the sublime mystery of God's redemptive love.

[78] H.H. Pius XII, Encyclical letter *On Holy Virginity* ("Sacra virginitas") (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1954).

LEARNING HOW TO LOVE. V

The Community

A. DURAND

When our Lord calls us to leave all things and to follow him, what must be the effect on our human powers of love? Does this leaving of all things mean the abandonment of our natural potentiality for sexual love, affection and friendship? Does it mean that somehow all these must go and their place be taken by the pure and exclusive love of Christ? We saw how this could not be true even for the power of sexual love; and if not for that one, then surely not for the others. Father and mother we may forsake, but our affection for them we may never forsake. We may find it our duty to get rid of a friend, but we cannot rid ourselves of the power of friendship. Attempts to do any of these things would suppose that Christ is hostile to what is human, and so would be a kind of indirect rejection of his Incarnation. The more we grow in the love of the Son of Man, the more strong and harmonious must become all our powers of affection. It is we who have left the world for Christ who can come to love the world best. It is we who separate ourselves from family who will come to love father and mother, brothers and sisters, with the best love.[1] It is we who give up marriage, and the most intense of all natural loves, who thereby may become capable of a devotion still stronger and greater, both to God and to man.

To hold any other view — to hold, for example, that a girl who leaves her parents in order to enter religion, cannot truly love them — would oblige us to maintain something similar for our Lord himself: that because he left his mother for a vocation of suffering, which he knew she would share, he did not truly love her; and that, because he left his own people in order freely to accept a premature death, when he might have continued among them preaching and healing, he cannot have loved his people

[1] "I can't understand the saints who didn't love their own families" (St. Thérèse).

either. But it was divine charity, it was devotion to his Father, which urged our Lord on to his passion; and for him to hesitate over what pain his sufferings might bring to others, would be to suppose that his Father's will could be an evil will. No, by his obedience he brought life to his people, making them children of his Father; and by his death he won for his mother her immaculate conception, her sinless life, and her unique part in the redemption. The same way is open to us: we too can share in the passion, and can help bring eternal life to our family and to our nation. Saint John offers a simple phrase which should rise to mind whenever natural affection begins to tug at our hearts, or to rouse misgivings about our duty to those dear to us: "If we love God and keep his commandments, we can be sure of loving his children" (I John 5:2, Knox translation).

Out of love Christ calls us, and his call is to love. We enter the religious life for love of him, in pursuit of divine love, to be realised through the love of others. "Love was His meaning. Who showeth it thee? Love. Wherefore showeth He it thee? For Love."[2]

We leave the world in order to love the world more, not in order to escape from this deep human duty. We leave our families for the very reason that we love them, love them in God; and want to be able to do more for them than we could if we stayed at home. We are resolved to take a place like Christ's in their lives, serving them by prayer and penance.

As for our community, it becomes our second family. In it, as in all families, affection must be the great vital force, because without affection human beings cannot live. Nor can this affection become entirely supernatural all at once. Consider a passage from Saint Jane De Chantal which reveals what a realist she was, and how well she understood the slow road to divine charity. It is a piece of advice to superiors:

> Hold your subjects close, and give them a great regard for one another. Now, this you will effectively bring about by the love and esteem which you yourself show them in word and action: a general love, of course, the same for all, without any favoritism. Because I assure you that, if a Sister has not yet reached a high degree of sanctity, no matter how good she may be by nature,

[2] Julian of Norwich.

her life will not be happy if she thinks that her superior does not care for her, or holds a poor opinion of her.

> This is an imperfection in them, from which we must try to set them free, if we can; but patience. I know that what I am telling you is true; a certainty that their superior loves them is good for our Sisters, for it gives them a kind of light-heartedness which makes them able to bear any trial and it is a sure thing that our human nature cannot hold out for long without some satisfaction or gratification, until the day when it is fully and entirely mortified. Now, since the Sisters have abandoned everything that might bring them such satisfaction in the world, it is vital that they find something to take its place in the love and trust of their Mother, and in the affectionate companionship of their Sisters. If they find no comfort there, they will go looking for it somewhere else, following the urge of self-interest, and not the good interest of the community.[3]

But as the new family into which we have entered is entirely supernatural in aim, as it exists for no reason but to bring us to the love of God and to make us servants of this supreme love, so our affection for its members must be transformed by the same love. It is not for nothing that we now call our companions, all of them without exception, our *Sisters*. Our Sisters they must become. Affection for every single one of them is now a duty which is part of our love of Christ. Often it is not an easy duty, and this is why those who are affectionate by nature, and who come from homes where there was strong affection, enjoy a great advantage; while those who have little or no experience or power of natural affection (like those who have little natural power of courage, honesty, or self-control) are under a heavy handicap.

How this affection is to be transformed into charity, we have also seen. When it is a need-love, it must incline us humbly to accept the kindness of others as coming from our eternal Father, so that we are glad to be dependent on them, yet never give way to the temptation to substitute human affection for divine. When it is a gift love on our part, we must give it without stint, without thought, without hesitation, without hope of reward, without hope of thanks, simply because this is to be like our eternal Father.

We then saw how sexual love, in its turn, is raised to the divine level, this time by a sacrament. And we studied this sort

[3] *Oeuvres de Ste. Chantal.* Paris, 1876, v. II, p. 238.

of love, and the sacrament which makes it holy, partly in order to understand what we are giving up, but most of all in order to understand what we are not giving up, in order to seize the full reality of our own vocation, since it is Christian marriage which is its supreme image.

As leading to human marriage, to physical children, and to the vocation of wife and mother, this love we do give up; but as representing union with Christ and the service of his family, the Church, we do not give it up. If we renounce devotion to another human being, whom our Lord might have given us as companion in the journey of life, and from whom we might have received the power to generate children of our own flesh, it is only in order to make our Lord himself our husband, to give to him alone all our love, and to receive from him the power of generating spiritual children. We give up physical parenthood, but only because we want parenthood on a grand scale, because we are resolved to be motherly or fatherly without limit, or, if you like, to that very limit which is the love of our eternal Father. To those outside the faith, the vow of chastity looks like the abandonment of the power of giving life to others. In reality it is just the opposite. It is an enlargement of our power of giving life, because it is a mighty enlargement of our power of giving love. And again, we are obliged to declare that souls who have little or none of that natural power of devotion which wives and husbands show, or who feel no natural attraction for the other sex, no natural desire for home and children, will be sadly handicapped in the religious life. They can hardly get much good from a vow of chastity which costs them nothing. They cannot have much love to give to God, or to anybody, if they do not even possess as much as nature intended. Please do not misunderstand. My purpose in this remark is not to cast doubt upon the religious vocation, but merely to stress once more that our great task, in learning how to love our Lord and his children, is not to destroy, but rather to fulfill, our natural powers of love.

Through all these remarks on how we who are called to the state of perfection must transform the natural affections, one kind of natural affection has not been mentioned at all. It is that of friendship. In the religious life, what are we supposed to do with

friendship? Dare we attempt to assimilate it as readily as we do affection? Or is there something about this form of attachment which makes it a special menace to our common life?

Perhaps you are surprised at this sudden expression of misgiving. Have I forgotten all those fine quotations used earlier, where Sacred Scripture speaks of the treasure of good friendship? And aren't there famous passages in classics like the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, urging the Christian to value true friendship as an immense aid to sanctity? No, I have not forgotten my own quotations, and it is true that Saint Francis supports good friendship in the work mentioned. But just now the people we are concerned with are those called to community life, and neither the passages from Scripture nor that famous little work by Saint Francis de Sales were written for religious living in community.

There is no denying that, down through the centuries, the attitude of religious communities, and the writings of those who make it their duty to guide religious communities, have been something less than friendly to the notion of friendships among souls summoned to make one family in Christ. And it is disconcerting to find Saint Francis de Sales rather explicit on this point when he is writing for monks and nuns and not for lay people. I call him *rather* explicit, because he is not quite so clear as he might be, and I intend later on to take advantage of such obscurity as may be found in his declarations. He puts it this way. There are to be no friendships in the religious life except such as can help to holiness and, since holiness is the aim of every single soul in a religious house, he finds it hard to see what good any private relationship can do. "Because, in a well-governed monastery, since the common aim carries everybody towards true devotion, there is no need in such an environment to form these private associations, for fear that, by seeking in private what is common to all, some might begin to be more partial to one member than to another." And a little later he observes that souls in the religious life have no need of special friendships, as seculars do, because they are all making their way over the same safe, even ground; whereas seculars face a rough and dangerous road and need the support of close companions.

In my opinion, the observations of Saint Francis need interpretation. He was writing for small houses of contemplatives, and could have no notion of the life of large missionary communities such as are common in our time. One feels bound to add that the history of his attempts to reform small houses, and the history of his own life, do not offer very good support for the position he is taking, as we shall see before long. The simple truth of the matter is that, in large congregations, it is going to be downright impossible to prevent friendships from forming; and I think Father Valentine is right when he contends that the superior who tries to prevent them will be working against grace as well as against nature. But if friendships are certain to exist, why is authority so often uneasy about them? Well, it is not because they cannot be good and holy, and a great blessing to community life; it is because when they are not — when they are bad — they are the worst blight a community can suffer. Religious superiors have a right to dread friendships among their subjects in somewhat the way young families have the right to dread mothers-in-law. If the mother-in-law is a really good one, she is nothing short of a benediction on the growing family; but if she is a bad one, she can wreck it more effectively than plague or famine.

In this respect, let it be noted, there is a great difference between friendship and affection. Our affections, whether as need-loves or gift-loves, may remain far from supernatural: we may still be selfish and immoderate in hunting for sympathy or encouragement, or in trying to give sympathy and encouragement. But this evil will never be so conspicuous in community life, nor so deadly to this life, as the evil of bad or false friendships.

So I think it our first duty to sympathize with the position into which superiors may sometimes be forced. If we consider what harm can be done to the religious life by bad or uncontrolled friendships, we shall see that it is not without reason that good spiritual writers warn us about this kind of human love more than about any other.

The first danger we must recognise in friendship in the religious community is that, of all types of attachment between people, this is the one which is most likely to withdraw subjects from the common life. Notice that I am not saying that it must, nor that it will, but merely that, of its nature, it is more likely than any

other sort of human attachment to separate a person from the rest of the family. Why so? Because it actually forms, within the true community, other little communities of two or three or more.

If these little groups, inside the main group, share the spirit of the whole, and devote themselves to the cause of the whole community, they may be a great asset. But will they live and move with the family? This is what authority has to worry about, and there are plenty of grounds for worry. Friendship is the one form of natural love which tends to make people proud and self-satisfied in their relationship. This is because it is by their convictions and plans — by things of their own doing — that friends are joined, so that they themselves seem responsible for their union of minds. Common blood is different: it is something nobody can take credit for. Parents, brothers and sisters were not of our choosing, and so are much more likely to be accepted as given by God, to be loved by nature and by duty. But it is not common blood which brings friends together; it is common opinions and common projects. We meet friends, therefore, as equals, and may easily come to think that we have chosen them because they alone are worthy of us, while we alone are worthy of them. Only our little group are capable of appreciating good music; or only intellectuals like us see the foolishness of card-games, checkers, scrabble, and all those pastimes of lesser minds incapable of cultured conversation; or, to go to a dreadful but quite possible extreme, only our chosen band really understand Saint John of the Cross and are capable of mystical experience.

The pride and complacency which may so easily arise in friendships are bad enough in themselves, but they can mean deadly peril to the community if it should happen that the common purposes which hold a little group together are not innocent.

Let me explain. Almost any sort of interest can draw people together into some sort of friendship. Here is an idle example. Suppose that you happen to like crossword puzzles, while everybody else you know despises them. You are making your lonely way through an unfriendly universe, in which nobody but you appreciates crossword puzzles, when, behold, one day you meet someone who confesses to you, in a shame-faced whisper, that the one thing she has never been able to get enough of is crossword puzzles. You cannot restrain a glad cry. The world looks different

now; you have found a kindred spirit, and the possibility of a consoling friendship.

But suppose the thing you discover that you both secretly enjoy is not a harmless pastime! Suppose it is the secret rejection of a rule, or the secret detestation of a superior, or a secret indulgence in bad reading, or some secret even worse. Now you have found somebody with the same hidden weakness. And let us say that the two of you find a third; and this third tells you about a fourth, who has been her partner in crime for a long time. What an ugly sort of conspiracy can now spring into existence! What new strength and comfort each may derive from the others! All are now ready to help one another with occasions and excuses. Each conscience finds its burden lighter, for the wonderful reason that somebody else does this too. The whole group soon become hardened; deceit is multiplied; human respect makes one reluctant to desert the other; and superiors are faced with a state of things which leaves them helpless.

The religious community exists to work for the will of Christ. When, in its very midst, there arises a new little community which is working to escape or to oppose the will of Christ, what must be the final result? It is no longer a group of friends we have now; it is a gang of accomplices. Even though the matters in which they offend be slight, their constant disregard for the common spirit is not. These unhappy souls are no longer in the community at all; they do not think or act with the family; sooner or later, implicitly or explicitly, they must reject obedience, and eventually all serious attempt at goodness. For certain members of the community, the company of certain other members has become an occasion of sin. Think what that means. If the evil spreads, the community is doomed.

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Imperfections

EDWARD HAGEMANN, S.J.

How often the thought has come to us, "O those imperfections of ours! If we could only get rid of them or diminish their number, then everything would be all right." So much is said in the spiritual life about working against imperfections that we are liable to judge progress by their decrease, as *The Imitation of Christ* has it, "If every year we would root out one vice, we should soon become perfect men" (Bk. I, Chap. 11).

Perhaps we might even regard perfection as a state without imperfections, and then be greatly upset when imperfections occur. As a matter of fact, to live a spiritual life without imperfections is quite illusory. Just as it is impossible for a Christian to avoid all venial sin — for despite his best intentions he will at times lapse into venial sin, according to the teaching of the Council of Trent (DB, 833) — so imperfections will occur from time to time and probably quite frequently.

In the early years of the religious life we seemingly were successful in our struggle against imperfections; but after a few years we seem to reach a static state — or perhaps better, a state of equilibrium — where, no matter how hard we strive, we seem to make no special progress in eliminating or combating imperfections. We will be frustrated and possibly dejected unless we remember that besides concupiscence the physical and psychological roots of our imperfections remain: our temperament, our nervous disposition, the lasting influence on us of our early environment and education. Hence, despite the author of *The Imitation*, we never eliminate the roots of a defect and we shall always have our particular wayward tendencies within us and often be conscious of their presence. It is a question not of eliminating defects but of learning to control these exaggerated, perhaps at times sinful tendencies, while fostering and encouraging the good qualities of our temperament.

What should be our reaction when defects occur? This is important to know, for otherwise we can plague our lives to no

avail and allow unhappiness and nervous tension to enter where there should be peace and tranquillity. We remember the revealing passage in the writings of Saint Thérèse when she describes the effects the words of a confessor had on her during a retreat: "He launched me in full sail on that sea of confidence and of love on which I'd been afraid to venture, though it attracted me so strongly. He told me that my faults were not such as to merit God's displeasure." The confessor's words, "I assure you that he (God) is well satisfied with what you are doing for him," gave her a new start in the spiritual life. "Imagine," she wrote, "what a consolation those words were for me — nobody'd ever suggested to me that one could have faults which nevertheless didn't offend God."[1]

How, then, are we to act in the case of these actual defects, even when they might involve sin? A solid view is that they should not discourage us but that we should profit by them. Thus we find in Tanqueray: "All we have to do as regards these faults is to lessen their number and ward off discouragement... We must detest our faults and our failings, but with a calm hatred, highly conscious of our weakness and misery, and firmly determined to make them an occasion of giving glory to God by bringing more love and more fidelity to the fulfilment of our present duties."[2] Father Saint-Jure, S.J., writes in the same vein: "Never lose sight of this great principle of perfection, that our infirmities ought never to discourage us, but to serve to humble us and teach us to conceive a low esteem of self, recurring to God with childlike confidence, since He alone can help us."[3] Father Frederick William Faber wrote an entire essay on imperfections, which breathes peace and confidence in God. He excoriates discouragement on account of our defects: "Discouragement, moreover, is no part of genuine penance. It atones for nothing, satisfies for nothing, merits nothing, impetrates nothing. It does not make us more careful next time: rather the opposite, for, by dejecting us it makes us at once more open to temptation and less masculine in resisting it. But on the contrary there is much good in not being cast down. We shall

[1] *Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, translated by Ronald Knox, New York, 1958, p. 211.
[2] *The Spiritual Life*, Westminster, 1948, nos. 724, 725.
[3] *A Treatise on the Knowledge and Love of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, I, New York, 1868, p. 489.

be less teased with the imperfection in ourselves, and more occupied with the infidelity to God. To fall and not be out of spirits with the fall is not only to keep the courage we had, but to gain more."[4]

I should like to go a little farther than these authors and introduce a new, additional note, that of joy; or perhaps I am simply bringing out explicitly what they say implicitly. Let me begin by recalling the very striking, even startling statement once made by Blessed Claude de la Colombière, S.J. A sick nun had written to him complaining that she had so little to offer to God when she would appear before him. In his reply la Colombière wrote: "Do you know what would help to awaken my confidence if I were as near to going to give an account to God as I hear you are? It would be just the number and greatness of my sins. That is a confidence worthy of God, which far from being discouraged by the sight of its faults is strengthened on the contrary by the notion it has of the infinite goodness of its Creator.... It is certain that of all kinds of confidence that which most honors the Lord is the confidence of a notorious sinner who is so convinced of God's infinite mercy that all his sins seem to him as an atom in the presence of this mercy."[5]

We may take the principle underlying this statement as a way of handling defects. Our defects should certainly not discourage us. Rather, the greater they are in number, the more they should arouse our confidence in God. As we know from experience in our struggles against defects, we tend to worry about them, we fret, we scold ourselves, and so we tend to become discouraged. I believe the best way to combat defects is the very opposite — to be happy with them, to rejoice at them, and thus to have boundless confidence in God's goodness.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux acted thus and she tells us that God was not displeased: "I can always find some reason to be glad of my failures and make the best of them, and our Lord doesn't seem to mind."[6] She actually boasts: "I've learnt not to be surprised at anything — it doesn't worry me to discover that I am frailty itself; on the contrary I go about boasting of it. Every

[4] *Growth in Holiness*, London, 1860. Ch. XX, "The right view of our faults," pp. 376, 377.
[5] *Faithful Servant*, St. Louis, 1960, p. 282.
[6] *Autobiography*, p. 210.

day, I expect to find out a fresh lot of imperfections in my character."[7]

Of course, if there is some willful offence against almighty God, some venial sin, we should be very sorry for having offended him. If we make an act of sorrow, it should be of very brief duration. But there can be satisfaction, even joy, at the humiliation this fall has brought us — other people have seen us as we are — and at the fuller knowledge we have acquired of ourselves. Thus Father Grou, S.J., writes in the twenty-first of his *Spiritual Maxims*: "The third counsel — and it is that of Saint Francis of Sales — is to grieve for our faults for God's sake, for it is He Who is offended by them, and to rejoice over them for our own, because of the humiliation they cause us. To practice this counsel, which is one of great perfection, is to draw from our falls all the profit which God had in view in permitting them."[8]

Saint Francis de Sales feels it is good for us to be seen as we are, that we should be happy about it. "You must not, then, be astonished or discouraged when you commit some fault or imperfection before your sisters, but, on the contrary, you must be very glad to be seen as you really are."[9] Elsewhere he insists on a repentance that is "strong, settled, constant, tranquil, but not troubled, unquiet or fainthearted."[10]

Scolding of self or kicking of self comes from self-love, which of course is nothing else than pride. Father Caussade distinguishes between sorrow caused by self-love — the love that puts self before God — and sorrow springing from the true love of God: "Sorrow born of self-love is full of vexation and bitterness; far from healing the wounds of our soul, it only serves to poison them. On the other hand, sorrow produced by the love of God is calm and full of resignation; while detecting the fault it delights in the humiliation which follows, and from this it results that much merit is gained, and thus even from losses we make profit."[11]

This fuller knowledge of our imperfections should establish us more in true humility, in the realization of our own nothingness, and of our inability by ourselves to advance in virtue. Everything

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 270.
[8] *Spiritual Maxims*, London, 1961, p. 238.
[9] *The Spiritual Conferences of St. Francis de Sales*, London, 1906, p. 67.
[10] *Treatise on the Love of God*, Westminster, 1942, p. 382.
[11] *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Exeter, 1921, p. 173.

comes from the goodness of God, nothing good from ourselves. This is a conviction that should bring us deep joy. Saint Ignatius in a letter to Francis Borgia states that we all have defects in our relations with God. "In fact, we set up obstacles before our Lord lavishes His graces upon us and after He has done so, with the result that we fail to retain them." Yet this should not be a cause of dissatisfaction with self but rather a cause of greater satisfaction and joy. "For my part, I am convinced that I am nothing but obstacle, both before and after, and I find this a source of greater satisfaction and spiritual consolation in our Lord because I can thus attribute nothing to myself which has any appearance of good."[12]

I think most good people believe that, as they advance in the spiritual life, imperfections should become less numerous. Yet the contrary seems to happen. Imperfections become more numerous, or rather, one becomes more conscious of them. As Father Grou says: "These faults of pure frailty become more frequent, and apparently more grave, in proportion to the progress made. Some particular fault, which appeared to have been cured, now seems more imperious than ever. Passions which one thought had been mastered and brought under control, become more rebellious."[13] This interior struggle forces us to the realization of the utter helplessness of the human will in supernatural things without the aid of God's grace and of our complete dependence on God's goodness. We knew this before, of course, but only academically. Now we grow in experimental knowledge of the meaning of Christ's words, "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). Actually, as we advance, we may become conscious of new, greater, or more numerous imperfections. As Saint Thérèse says: "Later on, no doubt, my soul will appear full of imperfections."[14] If we had seen these when we started out on the way of perfection, we might have lost heart. But as we advance God gently draws back the veil and allows us to see defects more and more — not so much individual defects but veins of selfishness running through our lives — until we see ourselves as we really are: nothing in ourselves, depending in everything on God. Thus we get closer to

[12] *Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, Chicago, 1959, p. 84.
[13] *Spiritual Maxims*, pp. 241, 242.
[14] *Autobiography*, p. 270.

ultimate reality and see ourselves as creatures and God as our Creator. Father Caussade tells us that "according to the progress we make God gives us corresponding light, and a more lively realization of our misery and poverty, to retain in us the treasures of grace and virtue of which our enemies would deprive us if God did not bury them in an abyss of misery well known to ourselves and keenly apprehended by us."[15]

But don't these defects hurt our spiritual life? If they do, may we not justly be somewhat depressed? Here we must make an important distinction. If these defects occur *despite* our interior attitude, then all is well. This attitude is a keen appreciation of God's good pleasure and the fixed determination to do God's will always. Thus the will is turned to God in a state of dependence, is attentive to his good pleasure, is docile to him. If these defects occurred as the *result* of an attitude, then there would be reason to be concerned: they would hurt the spiritual life, for they would indicate that the will is not completely given over to God in docility. Where the defects occur despite our basic attitude, they are merely incidents — to be regretted, of course, but to be accepted as a matter of course and as part of the cross. If the will happens to enter into them, it is deflected just momentarily from its attention to God and returns immediately to him like a piece of metal that springs back immediately into position or like a flow of electricity that has been interrupted for a second or two. As we advance in the spiritual life, the will will enter less and less into these defects and thus they will become less voluntary. Such advanced souls, Father Grou says, have "a keener and deeper consciousness of their weakness through the faults to which they give way, since it is because of their weakness that they fall. They do not want to commit such faults. Indeed, they make the most earnest resolutions against them; they multiply their prayers and austerities, and yet they fall. But God only allows this to happen in order to keep them humble and make them realize their own nothingness.... So long as they strive faithfully to abandon themselves to God's guiding Providence; so long as they do not intentionally permit themselves the slightest imperfection and relax no exercise of piety, their falls will not be considerable in them-

[15] *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, p. 145.

selves. They are exterior and apparent only, for the will has no share in them."[16]

What we must deprecate is a deliberate and habitual retaining of something against the will of God, not yielding ourselves up to him in docility — a docility in the present, where the imagination is not allowed to conjure up tremendous sacrifices that God might ask of us in the future. Where, however, this docility is had, defects, no matter how often they occur, not only do not draw us from God but can cement the love between the soul and her Creator. Just as forgiven sin can increase the soul's love for God, as our Lord expressly told the Pharisee relative to Mary Magdalene (Luke, 7:47), so numerous imperfections continually being forgiven by God can be the occasion of our loving him all the more eagerly. As Father Eugene Boylan says, "Only those who have learned to glory in their infirmities know to the full how intimate a union of prayer and work with Jesus can be built on their own weaknesses, on their own failures, and even on their past sins."[17]

In his *Manual for Interior Souls* Father Grou finds a consoling reason for frequently occurring imperfections. He feels that they often come from the ardor with which we advance in the way of perfection. Timid, over-cautious souls who always want to be sure they are doing the right thing, and who wish never to contract the least stain, will not advance half as fast as the generous ones. "It is not those who commit the fewest faults who are the most holy, but those who have the most courage, the most generosity, the most love, who make the greatest efforts, and who are not afraid of stumbling a little, or even of falling and staining themselves a little, provided they can always advance."[18] He says that when we fall into some fault, we should raise ourselves up again quietly, ask God's pardon, and then never think of the fault again until the time comes to accuse ourselves of it in confession. And if in our confession we forget it, there is no reason for being uneasy on that account.

Imperfections, finally, should bring us very close to God in loving confidence. If a young child can walk securely, he feels

[16] *Spiritual Maxims*, pp. 244, 245.
[17] *Difficulties in Mental Prayer*, Westminster, 1948, p. 86.
[18] *Manual for Interior Souls*, Westminster, 1955, p. 83.

he does not need his parents so much, but if he stumbles or feels weak he will look for them and put out his hand in loving trust to father or mother, knowing he will always be helped. And from the point of view of the parents, they are more tenderly conscious of their frail child and more effusive in their affection for him than for his stronger brothers and sisters. Thus the more often we stumble in our advance in the spiritual life, the greater will be our realization of how much we need God's help and the more confidently will we put out our hand to him in loving trust. Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity once wrote: "To me it seems that the weakest soul, even if it is the most guilty, is just the one which has the best grounds for hope, and this act by which it forgets itself to throw itself into the arms of God glorifies Him more and gives Him more joy than all the falling back upon self, and all the self-examination which makes it live in its wretchedness."[19] Moreover, our falls are so many proofs not only to us of how much we need God but, so to speak, also to God himself, who thus has evidence of the fact that we need him.

The Church puts on our lips before Holy Communion the words of the centurion, "Lord, I am not worthy." This is a public confession of our weakness and of our potential sinfulness. This acknowledgment is not a hindrance. It does not keep us from our Lord. Rather it is the immediate preparation for receiving him. Nor does it produce sadness. On the contrary, it makes us look to God's loving omnipotence with confident joy: "Only say the word and my soul will be healed." And if before Holy Communion we joyfully admit our weakness in drawing close to Christ, so during the day we can occasionally, as at visits or during examen, joyfully acknowledge our defects so as to find our help in God.

Our defects, then, should be an occasion of happiness to us because they show others and ourselves our real self. In this way they bring us closer to reality in making us realize our complete need of God in the spiritual life. We are sorry if there has been some sin in our defects, but an act of sorrow, if made, should be short. It is quite possible that our imperfections will not decrease

[19] *The Spiritual Doctrine of Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity*, Westminster, 1948, p. 74.

in number, but they will become less voluntary. We shall not be concerned too much with our defects but rather we shall fix our attention on the really important thing: to keep our wills docile to the divine will in an attitude of complete surrender to God. Actually these defects may be due to the ardor with which we advance in God's service. Finally, we shall cling to God like little children who in their difficulties always seek their parent's hand. And so we should rejoice in the Lord not *despite* our defects but *because* of these defects.

TO HAVE LOVED AT ALL

Fragile is the rose I keep
and a dove has fled my
sky where a rayon veil hangs
in a shroud clouding memory.

Black and white is reality I
know and seldom muse upon
in my pentecost that time
may cure this complimentary wound.

Tennyson's noble quotation
plays upon my ear and I can
only feel more certain Christ
was my peer.

FRED PENNING

Book Reviews

THE VOCATION OF LADY CHRISTINE. By Sister Eblana, O.D.C. Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, 1964. Pp. 90, Cloth $2.75.
The biographies of kings and queens, of princes and princesses make for stories of never failing interest. And when the subject is from the House of Bourbon, a new dimension is added.

Granddaughter of King Henry the Fourth of France, Anne Louise Christine Epernon accompanied the royal retinue on pilgrimages and visits to convents such as that of Carmel, where one day she felt our Lord's call to this life.

Despite her opportunity to wed royalty, despite her father's persistent opposition to her desires, Christine entered Carmel where she lived the rule to the hilt. Nothing extraordinarily mystical occurred in the 53 years she lived as a humble nun. The significance of Sister Anne Marie's life consisted in the spiritual influence, through prayers and kindness, that she had on the lives of others. From the walls of Carmel she affected the lives of courtiers, nobility, royalty. Her father, an erstwhile worldly man, she helped to turn toward sanctity; the mistress of King Louis XIV, Eva La Valliere, became a Carmelite like herself.

The author of this volume, Sister Eblana, has a story here to tell and she does it well. There is atmosphere and flavor and style aplenty in the telling. We learn to like Lady Christine. Instead of the introduction of so many unnecessary secondary characters, we would have enjoyed a more detailed analysis of our heroine's character, a few more anecdotes to lend insight into Lady Christine's heart and mind. Even with this superficial flaw, this biographical novel makes for absorbing reading.

Sister Mary Xavier, O.S.U.
Louisville, Kentucky

TILTED HALOES. By Robert Eimer, O.M.I. Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, 1964. Pp. xv, 126. Cloth, $2.95.
How human are the saints? Some have been written about from time to time in such a way as to make their humanity doubtful to say the least. Father Eimer takes the opposite approach in his effort to show the saints as whole men or women, with all the qualities of a well-developed, integral human nature. The

quality of humor is his special concern, but one has the impression that he has overworked his material and belabored his point a little too hard. Humorous incidents can be as misleading as mortifications when removed from the context of their surrounding circumstances, and it is probably as dangerous to canonize a soul's humor as his penances. It was not Saint Anthony's fasts in the desert nor Saint Philip Neri's pranks that proved them holy men of God. Rather God took the whole man with his fasts and/or pranks, and found acceptable the faith, hope, and charity that prompted the one or the other according to either man's grace and temperament.

Some of the points are well made, particularly the humility-humor relationship. The material of this book would have made an excellent article. As a book, it is repetitious and unconvincing.

Sister Virginia Lawrence
Cenacle Retreat House
Wayzata, Minnesota

NUN-SENSE by Sister M. Madeleine, C.S.J. Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, 1964. Pp. 148. Cloth, $3.50.

This slender volume of essays comes from the pen of the president of Archangel College, which is the Junior College for postulants and novices of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Newark, New Jersey. In her twenty-five years of teaching in various schools and on several levels, Sister M. Madeleine has been a keen observer, not only of her pupils, their parents, and her teaching associates, but of all sorts of people, and her book is for them all. "*Nun-Sense*—Sense just for Nuns? Nonsense!" This caption on the jacket of the book makes good sense and so does every one of the capsule essays included in the seven sections of the little volume.

Sister Madeleine has a command of English that consoles the reader who is wearied with jargon and journalese. She has originality of thought that is often provocative, and she can clothe her thoughts in lucid and expressive language. Perceptive, humorous, sympathetic, she views the world of God's creatures—men and things—with a sensitive heart and an amused smile. Insights God has certainly granted her. Whether one reads "The Gift of Laughter" or "In Him was Life," "Fads and Fancies" or "Statistically Yours," "Cherchez la Femme" or "Pity the Poor Nuns," one senses the Christlike attitude, the Christian balance, the religious reaction. And one realizes a dual characteristic, the spiritual and the *spirituel*—that comprehensive French descriptive word that has no single English equivalent but connotes so much: witty, shrewd, ingenious, sprightly, lively, intelligent (to quote Cassell!).

Sister M. Madeleine has read widely. She did not acquire a doctorate in English from Fordham without that complement to credit courses. She quotes aptly and to the point from Plato and Theodore Maynard, from Bancroft and Robert Hugh Benson, from Whitman, Campbell, Carlyle, from Scripture, Shelley, and Gertrude von le Fort, from Linnaeus, Keple, and *Pravda*, and a host of

other sources. She is at home in Chanaan and Hollywood, on 42nd Street or Tin Pan Alley—whether in spirit or in fact.

Nun-Sense is not a strictly patterned book. The essays, a collection of short articles that appeared from time to time in a religious community magazine, touch on so wide a variety of topics, they will make attractive reading for just as wide a variety of readers. They are not all of equal merit: some are excellent, some good, but none are "run-of-the-mill." Here and there a slip escaped, as when William *Jennings* Bryant is quoted on page 80. One can only hope that Sister Madeleine will continue to give us the benefit of her insights and perceptions, her deeply spiritual thoughts and reactions, along with her delightful and joyous fancies. *Nun-Sense* is good sense for all who read.

Mother Louise Callan, R.S.C.J.
Maryville College
Saint Louis, Missouri

MUTATIONS OF WESTERN CHRISTIANITY. By Arthur Mirgeler. Translated by Edward Quinn. Herder and Herder, New York, 1964. Pp. x, 158. Cloth, $4.50.

"The historian selects and records events or actions or thoughts of the past, and interprets and presents them" (p. i), and Dr. Mirgeler here looks closely at Christianity and antiquity and the result they produced on European civilization. The conversion of Constantine, the evangelization of the Germans, the influence of Celtic Christianity, the direction given history by the coronation of Charlemagne, the papal political clash with nationalism—all these are seen, not as directly affecting the history of the Church, but as transforming the spirit and outlook of generations of Christian people.

What makes this book fascinating and enjoyable reading is the light in which the author sees things—events necessarily found in any history text, but which to him become forces acting upon Western Christianity. In ten short chapters the author moves the interpretive pen from the Roman empire to the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment.

In the fourth chapter the theme is politics. Because of the alliance of the Roman Church with the Frankish kingdom, a state church was the natural consequence (as in the Byzantine East). Herein was Charlemagne's historical significance: he was lord of *Civitas Dei*, responsible for Church and state and the adoption of ecclesiastical and cultural traditions. Yet, says Dr. Mirgeler, because of the short-lived German monarchs, the Church gained greater freedom and grew "...out of the Constantinian amalgam with the Empire to rise as a power above both imperial and local rulers..." (p. 39).

Chapter five discusses the Heirs: the German miracle world. Dr. Mirgeler rightly points out that the decisive participation of the Germanic peoples in antiquity and Christianity results only because they are heirs to antiquity and Christianity. Their power to create a new civilization arises from their acceptance of public worship, the conceptual structure of patristic theology, and the shape

and contour of the Constantinian empire.

A summary and conclusion form the essence of the last chapter. The only thing which mars this excellent, short treatment of Western Christianity is its English translation. Although the grammar seems to be correct, a forced, clumsy expression makes it necessary to re-read some areas. Nevertheless, this book is worth its price.

Charles D. Griffith
Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota

THE FAITH APPLIED. By Jean Daujat. Translated by Norah Burke. Scepter Publishers Ltd., Dublin, 1963. Pp. 161. Cloth, $3.50.

To lead all men to Christ as Truth and as Life, Father Daujat offers this excellent doctrinal and practical theology. He presents the aim of life to his reader as the full possession of God who is joy: abolute, immense and unalloyed (p. 18). To attain such fulfillment, Christians keep the great commandments of love: "the filial love of the child of God for the father from whom he received the fullness of divine life and its joy," and "the love of others in and for God, love of them for God, love of them for the life of God" (pp. 21-22).

Having thus prepared the reader to understand the call to perfection —the growth in charity without measure—the author explains simply and clearly the whole program of Christian life under the slogan: "Watch and pray" (p. 43). The kinds of prayer; how to pray; the constant living in God's presence (the author stresses the fact that one must love every reality as a gift of God if one is to be realistic, p. 67); the obstacles to living in the presence of God; and three chapters concerned with Jesus Christ, his Mystical Body, and the sacraments are utilized by Father Daujat to develop his thesis. He concludes with a fine, short chapter concerned with the direction of Christian life and the Church.

Though written for lay people, religious will find much of value in *The Faith Applied.* It is eminently quotable, for example: "Prayer is the heart and head of Christian life" and must be as continual as breathing (p. 46); contemplation is "simply to look at God with love" (p. 60); "a sign of the true contemplative is his docile dedication to reality" (p. 70). Short statements, almost asides, give the reader new insights about Christian life and practices especially when the author discusses penance and mortification, the real meanings of one's daily crosses, and the place of prayer in the apostolate. Some of the recommendations made in the section dealing with the Mass seem a bit dated, e.g., to have and use a missal; others are yet to become universal, such as assisting at Vespers to prepare for great feasts. The translation is generally good and always readable, even eloquent in places. The book is recommended as a helpful guide to anyone who sincerely desires to live the Christian life—in or outside the cloister—in a more Christ-like way.

Sister M. Wilma Lyle, O.S.B.
Mount Marty College
Yankton, South Dakota

SHORT NOTICES

BEYOND THE COMMANDMENTS. By James J. Killgallon and Gerard P. Weber. Herder and Herder, New York, 1964. Pp. 224. Cloth, $3.95.

Ten essays of real worth urge every Christian to take up the Christian work of love and the free exercise of personal responsibility. An Introduction on "The Mature Christian" indicates some areas where perfection has not been reached, even in the lives of "good Catholics." This is a book for any Christian who would like to live a joyous response to God's love and would like to help others do the same. Surely that includes Sisters.

A VOICE SAID AVE! By Father Charles Dollen. Daughters of Saint Paul, Boston, 1963. Pp. 229. Cloth, $3.00, paper, $2.00.

A devotional tour of the science that teaches us to love the holy Mother of God. Examines selected passages from the writings of the Fathers, Doctors and theologians as they turned their keen minds to describe our Lady.

The advanced Montessori method. Vol. 1: SPONTANEOUS ACTIVITY IN EDUCATION. Pp. xi, 355. Cloth, $6.50. Vol. 2: THE MONTESSORI ELEMENTARY MATERIAL. Pp. xviii, 464. Cloth, $8.50. By Maria Montessori. Robert Bentley, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964.

Those who are interested in the current revival of the Montessori method in education will welcome the reprint of these two basic works, which were originally published in 1917 and have been out of print for many years. Both volumes have been reprinted without change (even the original illustrations are used in Volume 2). Though this results in some inadequacies in view of progress that has been made in the meantime, the author's thought is preserved intact without the interference of an editor.

THE HOUSE OF GOD. Sacred Art and Church Architecture. By R. Kevin Seasoltz. Herder and Herder, New York, 1963. Pp. 272. Cloth, $4.95.

Father Seasoltz, both canonist and theologian, here examines current canonical legislation in the illuminating vista of its full historical, theological and liturgical meaning. The church is viewed as a place of worship, where God and his people meet in liturgical function. A "must" for anyone involved in planning, building or remaking a place of worship.

JESUS CHRIST: His Life, His Teaching, and His Work. Complete in one volume. By Ferdinand Prat, S.J. Translated by John J. Heenan, S.J. Bruce, Milwaukee, 1963. Pp. xix, 542 and 568. Cloth, $10.

This reprint, bringing Volumes 1 and 2 together under one cover, is eminently deserving of new notice. Father Prat's monumental study has a secure place in the vast literature on the Word of God. Understandably, fifteen years of continued biblical scholarship would indicate some updating, but, even as it is, its worth is real and abundant. It remains a basic work for literate Christians.

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